

Keratabasa: Javanese folk etymology

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Introduction

Keratabasa is the Javanese term for folk etymology although the origin of *keratabasa* itself is not known. As *kerata* denotes ‘hunter’, and *basa* ‘language’, *keratabasa* may literally mean ‘searching of words’. Professionals of Javanese literature and language, *dhalang*, shadow puppet players are well familiar with *keratabasa*.

Although the number of terms which have *keratabasa*, published in articles and books is about fifty, *keratabasa* can be productive and creative. This paper will discuss what differentiates *keratabasa* from the folk etymology of other languages; what kind of words are found in *keratabasa* vocabulary; and what are the phonological features of *kerata basa*.

I will also argue that *keratabasa* is influenced by the Javanese preference for acronyms. In other words, *keratabasa* is a **reversal acronym**, so it could be a spontaneous word play. *Keratabasa* has the following features:

I. Combination of the last syllable of each phrase or clause.

Keratabasa is a phrase, clause, or sentence, which purports to provide the etymology of a word. The most popular pattern is a combination of the last syllable of the first clause/phrase and the last syllable of the second clause/phrase as shown in 1, a sentence *keratabasa*.

1. *bocah* = *mangané kaya kebo*, *pagaweané ora kecacah*.

child: eating-the like buffalo actions neg. counted

‘(The term) child originates from a sentence ‘his/her eating is like that of buffalo, and his/her actions are not countable’.

According to this *keratabasa* the last syllable of *kebo* ‘buffalo’ and the last syllable of *kecakah* ‘counted’ are combined to create the term *bocah* ‘child’,. In this way, *bocah* ‘child’ is considered to derive from the notion that *mangané kaya kebo* ‘his/her eating is like buffalo, and his/her action cannot be accounted for’.

Example 2 is a clausal *keratabasa*.

2. *guru* = *digugu lan ditiru*

teacher= to be obeyed and be imitated

“teacher = (one who is) to be obeyed and imitated”

According to this *keratabasa* the term *guru* ‘teacher’ derives from the phrase *digugu lan ditiru*. The last syllable of *digugu*, a passive form of *gugu* ‘to obey’ and the last syllable of the passive form of *tiru* ‘to imitate’ are combined to make the term *guru* ‘teacher’.

Example 3 is another phrasal *keratabasa*.

3. *gusti* = *bagusing ati*
lord beautiful-LOC ati

The term **gusti** ‘lord, master’ then supposedly derives from a phrase *bagusing ati* ‘beautiful in mind’, according to its *keratabasa*. The last syllables of *bagus* and *ati* are combined to make *gusti*. A particle or suffix does not participate in the formation of a *keratabasa* so the locative suffix *ing* is not counted as being the last syllable of *bagusing*.

II. Semantic classification of *keratabasa*

1. Categorizing people

Textbook *keratabasa* are often moral/ethical teachings as shown in examples 2 and 3 above. Therefore, adjectival *keratabasa* for certain categories of people are many.

4. *garwa* = *sigaraning nyawa*.
spouse split def. spirit/soul
‘One’s spouse (female) is a half of one’s heart/life.’

5. *mantu* = *dieman-eman meksa metu*
son/daughter in law to be cared, forced follow
‘Sons/daughters-in-law are supposedly forced to follow.’

6. *maratuwa* = *mara-mara ketemu tuwa*
parents-in-law become meet old
‘Parents-in-law are those who get old while coming to meet (sons/daughters-in-law).’

7. *wanita* = *wani ditata*
woman = brave to be put in order
‘Woman likes to be arranged.’

2. Categorizing occupations and actions

Occupations or actions are also described and evaluated by *keratabasa*.

8. *maling* = *njupuk amale wong sing ora eling*
pickpocket = take away good things people that neg. conscious
‘Thief = (one who) takes away the good things of people (who are) oblivious.’
9. *sopir* = *yen ngaso mampir (ing warung)*
driver = when take a rest drop by stall
‘Driver = one who, when taking a rest, pops into a stall.’

III. Non-Javanese

That *keratabasa* are not limited to providing etymologies to just Javanese words. Indonesian words and foreign words are also subject to being “explained” by *keratabasa*.

10. *januari = hujan saben ari*
January = rain every day
‘January is a month when it rains every day.’
11. *pebruari = yen mepe mburu ari*
February = when dry something **be left** [= be left outside?] day
‘February is the month you need more than a day to dry (clothes)’.

IV. Development to *Plesetan* ‘word games’

Since *keratabasa* involve punning they have developed to become jokes. For example, *wanita* ‘woman’ in example 9 above **has another keratabasa** as in 14.

12. *wanita = wani mranata*
woman brave to put in order
‘Woman is brave enough to put things in order’

This *keratabasa* is an ironical variation of the original *keratabasa*.

Garwa ‘wife’ shown in 4. above **has** another *keratabasa*.

13. *garwa = ketemune barang sigar karo barang dawa*
female spouse = match hing split with thing long
‘Taking a wife is to match a split thing with a long thing.’

V. Code-mixing

The tradition of coining *keratabasa* has spread to Indonesian. So several *keratabasa* are combinations of elements from Javanese and Indonesian.

14. *Sepeda = asepe tidak ada*
bicycle= smoke-def. neg. exist
‘Bicycle does not have smoke.’
15. *Sepur = asepe metu ndhuwur*
train = smoke-def. exit high
‘Train’s smoke goes up high.’

VI. Socio-historical background

VII. Conclusions

References

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